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1. Winter

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*Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. ~ Oscar Wilde*

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There was an old saying in the Ice Kingdom:

Glory onto those who uphold honor above all else, for they are hammer and fire that shape the Tribe.

It wasn't very catchy nor all that profound, but each word had been engraved into Winter's mind since his first breath out of the shell.

Your Tribe. Your Queen. Your Honor.

As far back as his memory went Winter had been told that those were the only things that mattered. Those three simple, enormous concepts encapsulated all a proper IceWing should come to care for; to trust. Everything else was trickery and lies. In a society that expects neighbours, brothers, sisters, even parents, to compete against each other for a chance at moving up in the rankings, it was difficult if not impossible to put faith in anyone.

Maybe that's where it had all gone wrong. If he had just been able to *trust* his friends, trust that they cared for him and liked him, maybe he wouldn't be in this situation.

Winter groaned. His face twisted into a grimace that fell into the midnight shadows of his dark room. He kicked off his sheets, turning to rest on the other side of his body with stubborn resolve. He hated nights like these. Where each minute lingered far too long and his mind dipped and pooled his worse memories together like a portrait he couldn't turn away from, forcing him to ruminate about everything he'd done wrong in his life.

And there was plenty he had done wrong.
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Words he would never say to his father, approval he would never win from his family, the Queen he admired and loved now dead because he hadn't acted quickly enough. He hadn't stopped Darkstalker. And, more recently, another question had sprung from the well of despair inside of him, pulling him apart with brutal precision:

*Why don't they trust me?*

He flipped his body again, searching for that forever elusive cool spot that everyone kept saying pillows had. He was starting to think that had been a lie.

With a mind buzzing and head far from calm Winter decided he was just wasting his time with this whole sleep business. Grumbling and fumbling he rose from bed, skirting along the length of the room to avoid stubbing his talons on the vague shadowy furniture that crowded him in. If his brain refused to cooperate then he might as well get some work done. He was aiming to publish a paper about Scavenger socialization.

He knew no one took his work seriously, but perhaps once he started producing data the world would see him, and Scavengers, differently. After a few moments of patting around he found the flint-box on the desk and struck the stones together until the flame found the wick. He repeated this until six fat candles warmed his face, their flickering hearts gilding his snowy scales with gold.

The scattered paper beneath his talons absorbed the warm light to resemble the autumn leaves Winter had come to enjoy. He inhaled a long breath. Time to get to work. He began by shuffling the papers into a tidy pile, then immediately took it apart to lay them all out in front of him. He read through what he had wrote the previous day, scrapped it, started over, then went back to find the crumpled ball he had thrown on the floor. Soon enough he was getting some headway into his writing, but for every moment of progress a swell of self-doubt followed and Winter would restart everything.

It didn't help that each time his mind wandered he found himself sketching out a certain NighWing dragoness.

Discontentment escaped him through a sigh. What was wrong with him? Maybe it was the candles. No matter how many candles he used they were never a match for the sharp, aethereal light of the Moon Globes back home.

*Home.*

The word bit. He had no home. The Sanctuary was fine and well, but it would never be the wind-scorched tundra or the snow-kissed peaks that he wished it to be. There had only been one way, one dragon, which he could have made a home with, but she was far beyond his grasp now.

Immediately Winter regretted the direction his thoughts had taken. Once Moon found her way into his head it was like planting a thorny vine in his brain; it was impossible to untangle her from his mind. The same thing happened with thoughts of Qibli, but it was the images of them *together* that really drove the dagger home.

His friends. His love. His rival. His failures.

Winter regarded the stacks of parchment at the desk with grating annoyance. He wasn't going to get any work done tonight. He gently pushed them aside and leaned back in his chair. Should he... no. He would not torment himself tonight with that picture. Not again.

This decision began to melt away as the minutes heaved on. His talons rapped the desk in an impatient jig, speckling the worked wood with tiny grooves and nicks that he would regret tomorrow. His gaze kept traveling down to the top drawer on his left. It contained a single item, precious to him beyond measure yet also despised for the way it could taunt him. In the end his talons betrayed him and before he knew it they had ebbed down to grasp the handle and pull it open.

Peering out from the drawer was Moon, a portrait version if her. Her charcoal eyes absorbed his attention and the firelight with gentle snares. Alarm bells rang in the back of his mind. Don't do this. It's a beautiful night; close the drawer and go for a fly. Instead he removed the picture from its cradle and held it before his face,

taking care to not rip the paper with his serrated claws. The paper was still stark white, the charcoal unsmudged. Winter had taken every precaution when he had moved his few meager belongings to the Sanctuary. It had been worth it.

Moonwatcher. She was as perfect in her stillness as she was in motion. An easy laugh hung on her lips as if any moment it would come fluttering out. Moons Winter would do anything to hear that sound. She was gazing off into the distance. When he had first drawn it he had been trying to capture her soft, curious nature.

After the night of the battle her face had taken on a new emotion. Now it was a slap to his face, as if she could no longer meet his gaze.

Perhaps that was for the best. He didn't know if he could handle those swallowing eyes anymore.

Winter's stomach churned with the raw emotions, guilt and humiliation pricked his spine and heart with venomous quills. He deserved every bit of his friends' scorn. How many times had he yelled at them? Insulted them and held his pride over their feelings? Always they had forgiven him. More than his family had. More than he deserved.

He had yelled at Moon that night. Anger had been his companion, Fear steering his heart. Loss and death and the doom of his Tribe had nipped his heels with every step and stroke of his wings. Shattered vase and shattered hopes lingered on the floor of those memories, and something bitter as well.

Claws like leaking eels closed over his throat.

She had defended Darkstalker. Called him a *friend*. Even after Winter had told her everything the animus had done, the plague, the curse on his own talons, yet still she had sided with Darkstalker. Qibli, too, had tried to dismiss Winter's concerns, because if it wasn't *their* Tribe in danger then it wasn't worth the fuss.

A sharp pain in his jaw reminded Winter to unclench his teeth. Wincing he stretched open his mouth and his accusatory thoughts

folded on themselves.

Was he wrong to be upset? His friends seemed to think so. Maybe he should as well. It's like his mother had always said: when it doubt assume *you're* the one that's wrong.

It didn't soothe the acid of his thoughts knowing that that advice had been for him and him alone. Hailstorm and Icicle had never needed such chiding. The guilt and shame were beginning to lap onto themselves now, one over the other like the crashing of relentless waves on a thin beach.

He had no right to be angry. It was a blessing that his friends still associated with him. Winter tried to feel grateful, truly, he knew he was indebted to them, but as always a venomous snap seeped through to mar the purity of his intentions.

*In the end all their talk of friendship was nothing but fluff. They wanted me to trust them, but in the end they couldn't even give me the same indulgence.*

After Qibli had erroneously transported him back to the Ice Kingdom with the rest of his Tribe, Winter had flew non-stop to return. The looks on his friends' faces he would never forget. Hesitant. Disappointed. Mistrustful.

Darkstalker was gone but Winter would never know how. They didn't deem him worthy to know. He didn't know where or when he had lost their trust.

When he had yelled at Moon?

Joined the battle?

When Qibli had mocked his fear and forced that enchanted earring on him?

It was a painful blur that Winter didn't want to think about, but one he had to live with nonetheless. How could he claim to still be part of their group if they treated him like a wolf among the herd?

He had been an outsider in his own Tribe, and now it seemed he

was still one.

Winter took another glance at the portrait, recalling the sting of Moon's mistrust. His jaw clenched once again. Perhaps the repeated nights of no sleep had bent his will like a sapling in a gale, but this time he didn't stop the onslaught of angry thoughts.

Why had he been such a *fool*? Falling in love, befriending dragons he barely knew, trusting them, opening up to them only to have them turn on him when he finally decided to fight for what he loved, when he finally revealed who he truly was.

How was it fair? Why was *he* the one ostracized? Weren't his feelings important?

Perhaps his friends had considered his decision to fight as him abandoning them, but he didn't see it that way. What had they expected him to do? Sit by and watch his Tribe get slaughtered when he could help? His Tribe had needed him more. It had literally been a matter of life and death. For all the pain and misery his Tribe had put him through, they were still his to love and protect.

So maybe they did feel betrayed, but so did he.

For every mistake he made there seemed to be twice the reprimand compared to anyone else.

Qibli had barely received even a scolding after the chaos he had caused in the Sand Kingdom with those enchanted bracelets. Winter still remembered the terrified expression of the SandWings as some were buried alive and others ripped from the sky into the shredding embrace of the sandstorm.

Then there had been the earring incident. What had Qibli expected to happen? Cornering him in like that when Winter had made it clear he didn't want the earring. If Qibli had just *listened* to him he would have never been hurt. Qibli had deserved...he had deserved it...

Like the flame of a candle his anger was blown out. Exhaling a long

breath Winter rested his forehead in the cup of his palms. No. Qibli didn't deserve to be hurt.

Of all the things that nagged Winter's conscience, the memory of harming Qibli was one of the strongest but also the most conflicting. It had been like someone else, a stranger, had reach down his throat to bring out the cold from within to use against his friend. His gut gnarled in disgust, remembering Darkstalker's sticky spell twisting into his brain like hot wire. The distinction between his own actions and the ones pushed on him through the enchantment were tangled in a messy knot in the pit of his chest. He was thankful that Qibli had had the sense to realize this...although his method of fixing it had been a bit flawed.

Even Moon he couldn't stay mad at. Darkstalker had been a dragon of many faces. It wasn't hard to imagine how someone as trusting as her might have been lured in and manipulated in other ways. He should have protected her better. He should have *been* better.

*They should have been better too...*

The strange thought ghosted into his mind. Many times he had laboured over the guilt of his actions, turning them over in his mind a million times to observe the shape of his life as veins in a leaf, the weight of his decisions marring the delicate skin with thick troughs. Everything that went wrong seemed to trace back to his path. He was the axis by which all the ruin and dishonor of his family spun.

Or was he? He had learned young to take the blows as they came. Show them your strength and none of your weakness, but keep your head down to those above you. It's easier to apologize than to prove you've done nothing wrong. Winter had had to lose a few rankings before learning that lesson.

But that had been in the Ice Kingdom. Out here he was among other mortals. Dragons who made mistakes just as he did. Shallowly Winter had known this. Of course he wasn't the only one to make mistakes in all Phyrrhia, even if his family made him feel like he was. Yet he had never really ingested that truth.

For all his life he could only see others through the lens of being

either better or worse than him. Perfect or flawed beyond hope with no in-betweens. At first he had seen himself better than his friends, than as the mistakes piled heavy like fresh snow he came to see himself as so much worse. A wolf among the herd indeed. Now the weight of the truth settled over his scales as dew upon the grass: they were equals.

Neither better nor worse than he. They had their golden moments that shone of kindness and warmth, bravery and resolve. Yet if one took a closer look at the precious metal its impurities took shape as plainly as scars on tissue. Qibli, Kinkajou, Peril, Turtle...Moonwatcher, none of them held their saintly halos.

The idea comforted Winter.

Both he and his friends had made mistakes towards each other; neither one held the moral high ground over the other. In growing increments the heavy tangle of guilt in his chest unwound bit by bit. In no way was it completely absolved, but no longer did he feel the sole barer of the wrongs committed, of one not worthy of forgiveness.

It was a small victory. With an embarrassed flush Winter felt a bit foolish for taking so long to make the realization, but he didn't let the feeling settle. He had plenty of dragons in his life to berate him. Tonight he would stop being one of them, or at least he'd try. He would have to unravel a lifetime of self-derogatory reflexes.

While he was at it maybe he could start forgiving himself as well. It would be nice to finally be able look his friends in the eye now, even if it was just in his imagination.

To test his theory he looked back down at the portrait still clutched in his talon and gasped in dismay. Sometime during his ruminations he must have grasped the picture too tightly, wrinkling the paper and smudging the outline. Frantically he laid it down on the desk and ran his palm along the wrinkled lines but stopped. He cocked his head, inspecting the image....had it always been that *bad*?

For whatever reason all the imperfections now jumped out at him like a bolt from the sky. He had drawn her snout crooked...and one

ear was bigger than the other. Wiggly lines, terrible shading, and, ugh, what had he been THINKING when he had drawn in her wings? They looked more like lumpy blankets than something capable of flight. For half a moment he wondered if it was worth fixing, but quickly shook his head. He didn't have the time! He still had that paper to get started, and in a few hours he would have to go and feed the Scavengers their breakfast. One day he might get back to it but for now he would set it aside. As a force of habit he went to place the portrait back in its home in the top drawer, but hesitated at the last moment. That space would be put to better use for his research material.

He glanced again at the photo, frowning. Something akin to sorrow or perhaps regret grabbed at his heart. In the hallows of his chest a small part of him mourned the idea of removing the drawing and putting it away, as if he was losing the last bit of Moon he still had left. Perhaps it was merely sentiment, but it was enough to tempt him. Or taunt him. Winter wasn't sure which it was. Yet there was another voice calling up as well, one that had been gaining strength over the past hour. Its growing voice politely reminded him it *was* just a portrait and, not so politely, that it wasn't even all that good of one. The real Moon was not here. This portrait was just a dull ghost of his true friends and an aching reminder of what had been and gone.

In the end he decided to place the portrait in a leather bound folder with the rest of his sketches. As soon as he did the heaviness of the air lifted free and for the first time in a long while Winter felt light.

He took a deep breath, enjoying this new-found energy before quickly putting the Scavenger literature in the now vacant drawer. With the clutter gone Winter's mind regained its focus. Drive to write filled him and he set out the parchment and ink in preparation. But there was still one thing missing: proper lighting. These candles just weren't cutting it.

Winter rose from his seat and went straight for the closed shutter, opening them with one strong push. Night air sweet with dew fill his lungs. It chased away the stuffiness that had clouded his mind and workspace. The stars were sharps as arrows and the Moons spilled their silver in thick sheets, coating everything with a pearly

sheen. It filled his room and settled over his desk like a rising tide of light, overwhelming the pitiful candles.

Winter's mouth quirked into a half-smile. Yes. Everything was in order now. With a satisfied nod he returned to his desk, the first sentence of his paper already clear in his head. There were still a few hours before dawn. Maybe he could get some work finished by then.

Brushed by moonlight, head bent over his parchment, the IceWing got to work.

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This took way longer than intended, but emotionally charged scenes tend to do that to me. So here's my Winter character study! It's something of a test run. I wanted practice with his character and do some more practice writing. This work certainly isn't perfect but if I needed to move on. Comments, critics, and/or questions are encouraged :D
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